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ABSTRACT

Moral reasoning, engagement in risk, and domain placement of risk as a moral, conventional, or personal issue were assessed in two groups of students: an intervention group participating in an alternative school program employing the just community approach to education, and a control group from the larger high school with which the alternative school is affiliated. Students completed a questionnaire assessing the frequency with which they engage in four types of risk (delinquency, substance involvement, sex, and suicide); a questionnaire assessing how participants categorize decisions about whether to engage in these risks (as decisions of morality, social convention, or personal discretion); and the Defining Issues Test. Overall, students perceived risk as a personal choice, with the exception of delinquency, which was perceived as a moral choice; however, for substance involvement, this relationship differed by level of risk engagement. Domain placement of risk moderated the reasoning-behavior relationship such that students who considered delinquent activity to be a least partly a moral issue, and whose behavior corresponded to their judgments, exhibited less preconventional reasoning and more post conventional reasoning than those whose behavior did not correspond with their judgment. This relationship differed by school, indicating that the intervention had positive outcomes. (Contains 14 references.) (Author/EV)

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The Role of Moral Reasoning and Domain Judgment in Adolescent Risk Engagement

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Moral reasoning, engagement in risk, and domain placement of risk as a moral, conventional, personal issue were assessed in two groups of students: an intervention group participating in an alternative school program employing the just community approach to education, and a control group from the larger high-school with which the alternative school is affiliated. The intervention group demonstrated higher levels of moral reasoning than the control, indicating that the intervention was successful. Overall, students perceived risk as a personal choice, with the exception of delinquency, which was perceived as a moral choice; however, for substance involvement, this relationship differed by level of risk engagement. Domain placement of risk moderated the reasoning-behavior relationship such that students who considered delinquent activity to be at least partly a moral issue and whose behaviors corresponded to their judgments exhibited less preconventional reasoning and more postconventional reasoning than those whose behavior did not correspond with their judgment; this relationship differed by school.

Adolescence has been called a time of risk, as engagement in risk behavior increases dramatically (Dryfoos, 1990). Although numerous studies have attempted to quantify the extent to which adolescents engage in risk, it is unclear why teens engage in such behaviors. Moral development, as a cognitive-developmental construct, may hold promise in increasing our knowledge-base.

According to Kohlberg's (1984) structural theory of moral development, the individual progresses through stages of reasoning capacity that are grouped into three levels (preconventional, conventional, and postconventional) to represent the relationship of the self to the conventions of society. Moral reasoning has been found to be related to risks such as substance involvement and delinquency (Hains, 1984; Jennings, Kilkenny & Kohlberg, 1983; Mohr, Sprinthall, & Gerler, 1987); however, its relation to other risks such as sexual promiscuity and suicide has not been investigated. If moral reasoning is related to engagement in risk, moral interventions (i.e., Powers, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989) may assist in lowering the overall frequency and quantity of adolescent risk engagement.

The literature on risk and moral development has tended to neglect an important potential moderator between reasoning and behavior: how behavior is perceived by the individual. The domain model of social development (Nucci, 1981; Turiel, 1983) is the second theoretical model that guides this research; perception of a behavior as a moral, social, or personal transgression is related to actual behavior, especially in situations where the role of personal choice and the role of moral or societal regulation is ambiguous (Nucci et al., 1991). Information about how adolescents perceive risk, and how it impacts engagement will aid in the construction of an accurate knowledge base about the causes and consequences of risk engagement.

There were several purposes to the present study: 1) examine the prevalence of risk

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engagement in a sample of suburban adolescents; 2) explore adolescents' perceptions of risk decisions and the relationship between risk engagement and domain placement; 3) examine the utility of a moral education intervention in promoting the development of moral reasoning and its impact on risk perception and engagement; and 4) examine how engagement and domain placement of risk are related to moral reasoning. It was hypothesized that domain placement, or perception of the act as a moral, conventional, or personal issue, would moderate the moral reasoning-behavior relationship. An interactive effect of domain placement and engagement was expected such that perceiving a behavior as a moral issue and not engaging would be related to higher reasoning, while perceiving it as a moral issue and engaging would be related to lower reasoning; perceiving a behavior as a personal issue was not expected to be related to reasoning, regardless of engagement.

Method

Participants

The intervention group consisted of 68 (46% female) students from grades 10-12 attending an alternative school program employing the just community approach to education, a moral intervention based on Kohlbergian theory (Powers, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989; described below). The control group consisted of 127 (54% female) students from grades 10-12 attending the "regular" public high school with which the alternative program is affiliated. Students were predominantly NonHispanic White; 12% described themselves as Asian American, 3% as Hispanic/Latino, and 2% as African American. While the sample is relatively ethnically homogenous, it is representative of the affluent suburban school district.

Intervention: The Just Community

The just community school is a democratic community, based upon Kohlberg's theory of moral reasoning and the kibbutz model of the collective (Powers, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). One purpose of schools is to transmit the values of society; the just community school approaches this goal by teaching justice, or by assisting students to develop an increasingly more adequate sense of fairness.

The just community school is a democratic community in the sense that each student and faculty member has an equal vote, or stake in the school. Weekly small group and full community meetings are held in which student discussion is encouraged, as exposure to the logic of higher stages of reasoning, especially the next highest stage, promotes moral development (Kohlberg, 1984); in addition, student discussion is the basis for building school norms..

Measures

Students completed a questionnaire that assessed the frequency with which they engage in 4 types of risk: delinquency (theft, violence); substance involvement (alcohol, marijuana, illicit drugs, and selling drugs); sexual involvement (engagement, unprotected); and suicide. A second questionnaire assessed how participants categorize decisions about whether to engage in the aforementioned risks: as decisions of morality, social convention, or personal discretion. Students also completed the *Defining Issues Test* (Rest, 1986).

Results

The frequency of risk engagement in our sample of suburban adolescents was examined with a 2 (school) x 2 (sex) x 3 (grade) MANOVA with substance involvement, delinquency, sexual involvement, and suicide contemplation risk scores as the dependent variables. Overall main effects emerged for sex, $F(4, 174) = 3.25$, $p<.01$, and grade, $F(8, 348)=3.84$, $p<.0002$. The means and standard deviations for risk engagement by sex and grade are presented in Table 1. Univariate F tests followed by Scheffes tests indicated that 11th and 12th graders reported more substance involvement than 10th graders, $F(2, 177)=9.84$, $p<.0001$, and 12th graders reported more sexual involvement than 10th or 11th graders, $F(2,$

177)=12.74, p<.0001. Males were more likely to engage in delinquent activities than females, F(1, 177)=12.62, p<.0005. Analysis of suicide contemplation scores revealed no significant main effects nor interactions.

The relationship between risk engagement and student perception of risk was examined with engagement x domain placement ANOVAs for each of the four risk categories. Main effects of domain emerged for each risk category. Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations for student engagement and domain placement of each risk category. Post hoc analyses with Bonferoni contrasts (α = .02) indicated that students were more likely to view substance involvement as a personal choice than as a moral or conventional choice, and a moral choice more often than one of convention, F(2, 370)=19.62, p<.0001. Similarly, students were more likely to view sexual involvement and suicide contemplation as personal decisions rather than ones of morality or convention, F(2, 372)=80.40, p<.0001, and F(2, 376)=82.04, p<.0001. In contrast, delinquent acts were considered moral decisions more often than ones of convention or personal choice, F(2, 374)=28.52, p<.0001.

An engagement x domain interaction emerged for substance involvement, F(8, 370)=8.54, p<.0001. Scheffes post hoc tests indicated that students reporting high involvement in substance use were most likely to indicate that it is an issue of personal choice, while those reporting no substance involvement were most likely to indicate it as a moral issue.

The effectiveness of the just community intervention on moral development across grade and sex was examined with a 2(school) by 2 (sex) x 3 (grade) by 3 (reasoning type) mixed ANOVA. Table 3 presents the means and standard deviations for students' level of moral reasoning by school and grade. Overall, our sample of secondary school students demonstrated significantly less preconventional ($\bar{x}$ = 3.87) than conventional ($\bar{x}$ = 38.57) or principled ($\bar{x}$ = 37.61) reasoning, F(2, 177)=491.38, p<.0001, supporting the notion that the progression of moral reasoning is a developmental phenomenon. A significant reasoning type x school interaction, F(2, 177)=4.72, p<.01, indicated that the moral education intervention was successful in promoting the development of moral reasoning. The control group demonstrated a greater amount of preconventional reasoning and conventional reasoning than the intervention group, while the intervention group demonstrated a greater amount of principled reasoning than the control group.

The relationship between risk engagement, domain placement, and the intervention to moral reasoning was assessed with a series of school x engagement x overall domain placement MANOVAs conducted with the percent of preconventional, conventional, and postconventional reasoning as the dependent variables. When subjected to Bonferoni correction (α = .01), only the delinquency MANOVA yielded significant effects. Specifically, an engagement x domain interaction, F(12, 452)=2.97, p<.0005, and a school x engagement x domain interaction, F(9, 416)=2.80, p<.005. The means and standard deviations are presented in Table 4.

The univariate Fs for the engagement x domain interaction were examined followed by Scheffes post hoc tests. Students who were conflicted in their judgments (i.e., viewed delinquent activity as a mixture of moral and personal issues) and highly involved in delinquent activities exhibited more preconventional reasoning ($\bar{x}$ = 9.7) than those who were conflicted and not involved in delinquent activities (3.7), F(4, 173)=4.61, p<.002. Similarly, students who judged delinquent activity to be a moral issue and were not involved in delinquency demonstrated more postconventional reasoning than those who judged delinquency to be a moral issue and yet were highly involved in delinquent activities, F(4, 173)=2.51, p<.05.

Univariate analyses for the three way

interaction were examined and planned contrasts were conducted in order to test our initial hypothesis: domain placement moderates the reasoning-behavior relationship such that perceiving a risk as a moral decision and not engaging would be associated with higher levels of moral reasoning, while perceiving a risk as a personal choice would not be related to reasoning regardless of engagement. Although many of the comparisons were significant, the most interpretable are presented. Among the control group, conflicted students who were highly involved in delinquent activities demonstrated more preconventional reasoning ($\bar{x}$ = 13.8) than students who viewed delinquent activities as a moral issue and were not involved ($\bar{x}$ = 2.96) and than students who viewed it as a personal issue, regardless of high ($\bar{x}$ = 1.67) or no ($\bar{x}$ = 1.11) involvement, $F(3, 173)=7.26$, $p<.0001$. Among the intervention students, those who defined delinquent activity as a moral issue and were not involved exhibited more postconventional reasoning ($\bar{x}$ = 49.83) than those who viewed it as a personal issue and were not involved ($\bar{x}$ = 20.00), or than those who viewed it as a personal issue and were highly involved ($\bar{x}$ = 21.67), $F(3, 173)=2.89$, $p<.05$.

Discussion

This sample of suburban adolescents exhibited sex and grade trends for risk behaviors in accord with the developmental literature (Dryfoos, 1990). Overall, students viewed risk engagement as a personal decision, with the exception of delinquency, which was viewed as a moral decision. The emphasis on personal choice is consistent with the developmental task of identity formation and adolescents' desire for autonomy (Erikson, 1950). With higher substance involvement, students were more likely to view the decision to engage in substance use as personal rather than moral or conventional, in accord with the findings of Nucci et al. (1991).

The moral education program was successful in promoting the development of moral reasoning. Students in the control group demonstrated higher levels of preconventional and conventional reasoning than those in the intervention, while the intervention group demonstrated higher levels of postconventional reasoning than the control.

In accord with our hypothesis, domain perceptions of delinquency moderated the reasoning-engagement relationship. Students who considered delinquent activity to be at least partly a moral issue and whose behaviors corresponded to their judgments in that they did not engage in delinquent activities exhibited less preconventional reasoning and more postconventional reasoning than those whose behavior did not correspond with their judgment (i.e., they were highly involved in delinquent activities). Specifically, this judgment-behavior inconsistency was related to more preconventional reasoning only in control group students. Control group students who judged delinquency to be a personal issue did not exhibit differences in level of moral reasoning as a function of level of engagement in delinquent activity. This is in accord with our hypothesis, as a behavior defined as personal is not under the domain of morality (Nucci, 1981); therefore engagement in the behavior was not expected to be related to moral reasoning (Berkowitz, Guerra, & Nucci, 1991). Finally, among just community students, those who defined delinquent activity as a moral issue and were not involved demonstrated more postconventional reasoning than those who defined delinquent activity as a personal issue and were not involved. It appears that not engaging in delinquency because it is thought to be a moral issue is indicative of higher levels of moral reasoning than not engaging in it for personal reasons.

Adolescents' differential perceptions of some risks as personal issues, others as moral, and still others as a mix of personal and moral issues, suggests that interventions must address specific risks such as delinquency, or sexual involvement, rather than risk-taking as a whole.

Our results suggest that risk engagement is related to moral reasoning when the behavior is perceived as a moral issue. The results also suggest that risk engagement is not related to moral reasoning when it is perceived as a personal choice, as is often the case for adolescents.

Killen, Leviton, and Cahill (1991) have argued that adolescents view issues that harm others as moral, while those that are perceived as affecting only the individual are viewed as personal decisions. Our results support their argument, as the risks that most obviously affect the individual (i.e., substance involvement, suicide and sexual involvement) were perceived as personal choices, while the one that most obviously affects others (delinquency) was perceived as a moral decision. This suggests that education to decrease risk engagement should help teens focus on the implications of their actions on others, rather than only on personal hazards which serves, albeit unintentionally, to define these risks as matters of personal decisions from the perspectives of adolescents. Interventions that emphasize the fact of others' involvement in all that an individual does may also call upon students' social responsibility concerns, and shift their views of risks from being personal choices to necessitating morally guided decision-making, a shift the just community helps students make. However, shifts in moral reasoning must cross the reasoning-behavior gap in order to affect students' engagement in risk, a continuing effort of the just community (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989) and other interventions (Dryfoos, 1990). In summary, interventions to decrease risk should continue to seek to promote moral reasoning, attempt to change teens' perceptions of risk from matters of personal choice to morality, and support their adoption of behaviors congruent with their developing sense of justice.

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Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Student Risk Engagement Scores by Sex and Grade, Across Schools.

	Substance Involvement (Range 0-4)		Delinquent Activities (Range 0-2)		Sexual Involvement (Range 0-2)		Suicide Contemplation (Range 0-1)	
	Mean	(sd)	Mean	(sd)	Mean	(sd)	Mean	(sd)
10th grade								
Male	1.16	(1.15)	.82	(.77)	.18	(.51)	.40	(.49)
Female	.88	(.79)	.41	(.61)	.14	(.45)	.51	(.50)
Total	1.03	(.99)	.64	(.73)	.16	(.48)	.46	(.50)
11th grade								
Male	1.70	(1.23)	.93	(.78)	.30	(.67)	.44	(.51)
Female	1.63	(1.36)	.73	(.83)	.50	(.74)	.64	(.49)
Total	1.67	(1.28)	.84	(.80)	.39	(.70)	.53	(.50)
12th grade								
Male	2.00	(1.24)	1.21	(.70)	.64	(.63)	.50	(.50)
Female	1.95	(1.15)	.65	(.75)	.95	(1.00)	.60	(.50)
Total	1.97	(1.17)	.88	(.77)	.82	(.87)	.56	(.50)

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for Domain Placement Scores by Risk Engagement, Across Schools.

	Moral		Conventional		Personal	
	Mean	(sd)	Mean	(sd)	Mean	(sd)
Substance Involvement						
No Engagement	2.29	(1.44)	.88	(1.18)	.75	(1.10)
One Behavior	1.63	(1.48)	.81	(1.09)	1.56	(1.29)
Two Behaviors	1.17	(.95)	.96	(.99)	1.85	(1.03)
Three Behaviors	.79	(.92)	.84	(1.21)	2.32	(1.25)
Four Behaviors	.42	(.51)	.50	(1.00)	3.08	(1.16)
Delinquent Activities						
No Engagement	.75	(.44)	.38	(.63)	.30	(.55)
One Behavior	1.09	(.73)	.69	(.76)	.34	(.64)
Two Behaviors	1.11	(.78)	.50	(.74)	.53	(.70)
Sexual Involvement						
No Engagement	.39	(.57)	.22	(.51)	1.38	(.69)
One Behavior	.50	(.60)	.18	(.39)	1.32	(.65)
Two Behaviors	.24	(.44)	.19	(.40)	1.57	(.51)
Suicide Contemplation						
No Engagement	.24	(.43)	.11	(.32)	.63	(.49)
One Behavior	.15	(.36)	.10	(.30)	.76	(.43)

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations for Moral Reasoning by School and Grade.

	Preconventional		Conventional		Postconventional	
	Mean	(sd)	Mean	(sd)	Mean	(sd)
Intervention Group						
10th grade	1.33	(2.74)	34.17	(24.18)	36.33	(12.88)
11th grade	3.45	(4.40)	34.05	(19.51)	38.21	(19.13)
12th grade	3.00	(4.82)	34.00	(18.81)	49.50	(15.68)
Total	2.70	(4.16)	34.07	(20.48)	40.98	(17.19)
Control Group						
10th grade	4.94	(5.70)	43.07	(21.91)	34.79	(16.70)
11th grade	6.19	(7.09)	42.70	(24.35)	29.05	(11.98)
12th grade	3.81	(5.04)	43.57	(20.23)	38.57	(13.44)
Total	5.03	(5.88)	43.06	(21.98)	34.23	(15.76)

Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations for Delinquency Engagement by Domain Placement Interaction on Student Moral Reasoning, Across Schools.

	Preconventional Reasoning		Conventional Reasoning[1]		Postconventional Reasoning	
	Mean	(sd)	Mean	(sd)	Mean	(sd)
Moral Domain						
No involvement	2.51	4.04	40.82	21.00	40.92	16.21
High involvement	4.29	5.29	39.68	22.65	30.32	14.14
Personal Domain						
No involvement	4.17	6.31	48.33	21.52	22.50	23.63
High involvement	3.33	4.71	42.50	12.58	30.00	20.18
Both[2]						
No involvement	3.70	5.10	42.96	23.12	37.04	14.73
High involvement	9.70	7.67	31.82	19.68	38.79	11.76

[1]Interaction was not significant for conventional reasoning.

[2]These participants were conflicted in that delinquency was perceived as both a moral and personal issue.